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ABSTRACT

This paper summarizes the results of a university case study that explored the process of demonstrating institutional trustworthiness and factors that influenced the institution's bid for trustworthy status. Interviews were conducted with 14 administrators and faculty, while volumes of institutional history, archival documents, and press coverage were reviewed. It was found that strategies for demonstrating institutional trustworthiness centered on a consistent portrayal of the institution as trustworthy because of its attention to realizing high-priority public goods, its institutional engagements for responding to societal needs, and the integrity and personal regard embodied by representatives on behalf of the institution. As respondents sought to demonstrate this trustworthiness, however, they were mindful of conditions or circumstances often beyond their direct control--that could facilitate or hinder perceptions of trustworthiness. A generally positive influence on public confidence in the university was respondents' involvement in the community. The administration's perceived lack of faithfulness to academic traditions of collegiality and faculty self-governance led many to question institutional integrity and trustworthiness. Virtually all respondents expressed concern about accurate media coverage of the university and its effect on public trust. (Contains 35 references.) (MDM)

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# Higher Education and Public Trust:

# Factors Influencing Institutional Trustworthiness

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## Introduction and Purpose

> Higher education may have been the last great institution in American society to enjoy unstinting public trust--but no more. Now, like medicine, religion and other important and once revered fields, higher education is discovering how difficult, and how costly, it can be to be scorned. (DePalma, 1992, p. 1)

This New York Times excerpt likely has a familiar ring to individuals in higher education. Pronouncements of an erosion of public trust in higher education often accompany media reports of ethical lapses in institutional decision making, neglect of undergraduate teaching, and the rising costs of postsecondary attendance. Prompted by recent assertions of an erosion of public trust in higher education (Alfred & Weissman, 1987; Bok, 1992; Eaton, 1991, 1994; Ewell, 1991; Harvey & Immerwahr, 1995; Mercer, 1994; Mitchell, 1987; Quehl, 1988; Wingspread Group, 1993; Winston, 1992), the purpose of this research was to advance understanding of the phenomenon of public trust in higher education.

This paper will summarize results of an institutional case study that explored processes of demonstrating institutional trustworthiness and factors that influenced the institution's bid for trustworthy status. The following section on conceptual framework will be followed by methods, a description of the case site, and selected findings of the research. A brief discussion of the processes of institutional trustworthiness will be followed by discussion of four influences on trustworthiness: community involvement, media coverage, status of internal trust, and institutional accessibility.

## Conceptual Framework

The theoretical constructs of contractual relationships and, subsequently, dialogic relationships, provided the primary conceptual framework for this research. A public trust is often regarded as a chartered, contractual arrangement in which social legitimacy and resources are invested in educational institutions upon the promise or expectation of future returns to society (Kamens, 1971; Meyer, 1970). Accordingly, the current crisis of public

A single-site case study (Stake, 1988; Yin, 1989) of Richland University[2] provided the occasion (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993) for studying public trust relationships as regarded and experienced by selected members of that institution. Interviews and archival research were used to gather data during 12 months of fieldwork. Interviews were conducted with 14 respondents (RU's president, four senior administrators, five academic deans, and four faculty leaders). Volumes of institutional history, archival documents from the last 25 years, and press coverage of the last 6 years were also reviewed. A constant comparative method of data analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was used to identify themes. At lease one member check was conducted with each interview respondent, and a peer debriefer was used to strengthen interpretive validity (Maxwell, 1992).

RU, the case site, is a Carnegie Research II institution in the middle US and one of several universities in its state system of public higher education. RU is located in its state's largest metropolitan area and maintains strong local outreach and service ties as well as an ever-increasing emphasis on faculty contract and grant activities. RU was selected as the case site primarily because its rapid enrollment growth, diverse institutional mission, and relatively recent change from city to state control all suggested institutional engagement with a variety of publics and institutional acknowledgment of multiple expectations.

## Results

### Demonstrations of Institutional Trustworthiness

Strategies for demonstrating institutional trustworthiness centered on a consistent portrayal of the institution as trustworthy because of: (1) its attention to realizing high-priority public goods (such as economic advancement of the community), (2) its institutional engagements (outreach and partnership endeavors) for responding to societal needs, and (3) the integrity and personal regard embodied by representatives on behalf of the institution. Figure 1 (appended) shows respondent conceptions and processes that are evidenced in institutional demonstrations of trustworthiness.[3] The overall characterization

of trust that emerges is a communicative, dialogic one as institutional bids for trustworthiness are received, considered, and evaluated. Respondents described a close engagement of key internal and external representatives in dialogue to determine community needs and select appropriate institutional priorities. In fact, a blurring of institutional and public spheres occurred as institutional representatives undertook key roles in state and local government and the business sector and as public representatives were invited to participate in the institution (e.g., in presidential advisory capacities). This relationship, as characterized by respondents, was more one of fluid and negotiated dialogic relationships than a relationship between contracting and contracted parties.

Habermas (1992) posits an ideal speech situation from which negotiated meanings emerge from such communicative dialogue. In this situation, all parties are necessary participants in the dialogue since the various lifeworld experiences and perspectives contributes to a richer negotiation of shared meaning. These dialogues occur for RU representatives on an ongoing basis as they attend meetings, network, socialize, perform their institutional responsibilities, and live their lives as citizens in the community. However, as Nancy Fraser (1989) makes clear, speech situations are often not ideal but asymmetrical as groups or representatives with differential power meet in public arenas for discourse. Using Fraser's categories (1989, p. 170), these arenas instead are populated by "leading" publics with formal authority, such as Richland's governmental, business, and civic officials, and "enclaved" publics whose potential authority springs from appeals to moral sensibilities, such as Richland's Coalition of African American Clergy, a community civil rights group. Nonetheless, the public dialogue is continual with various issues and groups engaged in discussions that marshal institutional and public resources in support of identified and negotiated community priorities.

It may be popularly presumed that an institution's "public" is a collection of individuals or groups "out there" in the institution's environment, and, in fact, RU respondents identified several groups and individuals as constituent members of its public.

However, respondents identified not just groups but the competing interests that various groups represented, so a conception of the public as a summative membership category or a re-aggregation of external individuals and groups may not be adequately robust. "The public" was used by many respondents as a conceptual device rather than a descriptive term, and conceptualizing the public as simply a larger collective appears to be inadequate for several reasons.

First, the notion of a summative "public" homogenizes as it downplays the different interests and competing claims represented by various groups, and it fails to convey the dynamic nature of activities undertaken to advance respective interests. Second, a notion of the public as a simple collection of different groups does not encompass the notion of fluid participation described by respondents. This fluidity occurs in changing and overlapping group memberships and also in the fluid nature of various groups' ascendancy or latency depending on prevailing circumstances and current issues. Third, and perhaps most importantly, a summation of external groups into a "public" does not acknowledge the participation of the institution itself as a party to public negotiations and discussions. For example, opinion-makers were considered by many respondents to be a critical public group, and the president particularly made clear the necessity of becoming an opinion-leader himself within the community. Additionally, RU's cooperative ventures and alignments provide for RU's serving its own interests in conjunction with external parties' interests. In effect, by virtue of its close integration into the community and its selective alignments, RU has increasingly become a local player and a part of its own public. For these reasons, a more satisfactory conceptual notion is "public" as a metaphorical arena or forum. In this space, various public interests and claims are negotiated and prioritized, and the institution is involved in this process not only as a potential subject of discussion but also as a participating discussant.

Some evaluation theorists have articulated related notions of public political discourse regarding social policies and programs. For example, calculation of Weiss's

political-benefit analysis (analogous to a cost-benefit analysis) of social programs occurs through appraisal and decisions made by public leaders in a political arena (Weiss, 1973). Additionally, Cronbach described a policy-shaping community of discourse and negotiation that explicitly includes participation from representatives of social programs about which policy decisions are made or accrued. He further describes decision-making through a political accommodation process involving negotiating strategic interests and assembling successful coalitions (Cronbach, et al., 1980). Influencing Weiss's political-benefit calculus and forming Cronbach's effective interest coalitions occur through direct institutional action or actions undertaken in the public arena by affiliated or supportive groups. For example, alumni helped preserve one of RU's professional schools through their public legislative testimony as well as through their indirectly exercised influence as powerful and well-connected citizens. The metaphor of public as arena or forum conveys the political nature of the participation and the importance of influence, status, and circumstance.

## Conditions that Influence Institutional Trustworthiness

Institutional bids for trustworthiness following the processes in Figure 1 do not occur in a vacuum. Figure 2 shows a backdrop to these demonstrations including four influential environmental conditions. Community involvement by RU representatives and the tone of media coverage of RU were identified as influential to perceptions of trustworthiness. This is not surprising. Direct public contact puts RU representatives in the public eye, and media reports on RU's activities serve to create or reinforce generalized impressions of the institution. For example, recent newspaper coverage of RU has included episodes of intra-institutional conflicts and disagreements. Reports of such conflict both substantiate and cultivate public opinions of institutional stability and trustworthiness.

Some respondents also concluded that the current status of trust within the institution influences external perceptions of institutional trustworthiness. Many

institutional representatives and particularly faculty respondents voiced concerns regarding the levels of integrity and interpersonal regard within RU primarily in terms of administrative decision making as embodied by the president and board of trustees. Although these concerns represent insider perceptions of institutional woes, respondents considered internal trust to be indirectly related to public perceptions of institutional trustworthiness since internal disagreements were publicly aired and served to cast the institution in a negative light. Finally, the institution's accessibility--direct and perceived--to public participation and input also contributes to perceptions of institutional trustworthiness.

These four conditions involve impressions of the institution created through direct public contacts with institutional representatives as well as through mediated portrayals of the institution. Each of the four conditions are discussed below in more detail.

Community involvement

Senior administrators and deans emphasized their involvement in the community as a factor that positively influenced public regard for RU. Many senior administrators made reference to the full complement of their involvement in various community and state-wide activities. On one of the days he was interviewed for this research, a senior administrator revealed that his day had begun with breakfast meetings downtown and would not end until after evening receptions for a large group of students and their families.

While some of the meetings and events were work-oriented, others were deemed important because they were not work-related. The president, on one day he was interviewed, noted: "Today I went downtown to a luncheon and got to stand up and wear a crazy hat {laugh}." He also mentioned a recent invitation to serve as scorekeeper for a charity basketball game. These events allowed RU representatives to step out of formal roles and assume a more publicly accessible status. One faculty respondent, while discussing his perceptions of administrative work and workload, expressed his personal

disinclination to accept an administrative appointment. Still, he acknowledged senior administrators' workloads and time commitments, including: "I have to say that the president earns what he makes. He earns it twenty-four hours a day." Many of the time commitments included community involvements, which were welcomed as critical opportunities for administrators and deans to humanize the institution they represent.

Birnbaum (1990) discussed the placement, maintenance, and selective activation of external sensing mechanisms that alert institutional representatives to potential problems or concerns. In addition to maintaining these mechanisms through ongoing professional relationships initiated and conducted with various external representatives, many RU respondents themselves served as sensing mechanisms for RU in the community. As one senior administrator commented:

> I would say another role that figures into feedback and understanding the public is, particularly in our case, we have people who live in the community and get direct feedback. I don't think that should be overlooked in terms of means of communication back to the president on what's going on. All of the deans, all the vice presidents, I mean, all of us get feedback and perspective on things and so, when an issue comes up, you've had a chance to interact with people in the community, provide people with an opportunity for input. . . . [W]hen I go out, I ask people what they think of things, and that happens often.

RU representatives are known within the community through their work roles as well as non-work roles of citizen, neighbor, parent, and friend. They show themselves to be committed and involved community members and, as self-conscious sensing mechanisms, they solicit and monitor feedback on behalf of RU. Further, as another senior administrator points out, assuming public status within the community is not an optional role for RU officials. Although Richland is a relatively large city, the community is small enough that RU administrators and staff are quickly recognizable as public figures:

> When you're me and you're [a physically imposing person], and you're walking around, it's not hard for people to figure out who you are after about a week in town. So how you treat those people verbally and non-verbally, on the street, in church, in shopping centers . . . People make opinions all the time. You can't be a senior administrator at Richland too long and not be a known person in this community. If we were in Chicago, New York City, LA, perhaps. Even then I'm not sure. But those are much larger communities and you have two different lives. Here you can't.

Perceptions of institutional trustworthiness are influenced by perceptions of and regard for institutional representatives. RU respondents generally accept this role and understand community participation to be an important part of their jobs and a critical opportunity to represent RU to the community. RU representatives, particularly at the senior administrative level, believed that their success at being perceived not only as responsible campus professionals but also as good citizens, neighbors, parents, and friends enabled them to humanize the institution and symbolize the institution's integration into the fabric of the community.

Media Coverage

The news media operates as a filter or, literally, a mediator between institutions and individuals. News media organizations presumably serve as ears and voices of the larger public represented by their respective readerships or viewerships. The Richland News-Mail is the local newspaper as well as the major newspaper in the state. All respondents expressed concern with the tone and accuracy of RU's media coverage in general, and concerns about the News-Mail's coverage of RU were particularly widespread. Yet, as demonstrated in the following discussion, negative coverage may also serve a latent positive function for RU.

The RU board of trustees' recent approval of four institutional governance changes (employment of contract faculty, periodic career [post-tenure] review of faculty, administrative confirmation of department chairs, and variable work emphasis for faculty members) was preceded by approximately two years of vigorous and prolonged meetings, hearings and negotiations between faculty and senior administrators. The News-Mail had regularly published stories on the meetings and hearings associated with the governance changes, and respondents were well-aware that the city newspaper was a primary source of news for the community as well as the state. As one senior administrator conceded:

> One of the problems here is that we're only a one newspaper town. I will go to some meetings and then what is in the paper is not necessarily what happened at the meetings, but that's what's picked up and that's what other people see and read. So that's a big issue in terms of any meanings that get made.

According to a faculty member, the News-Mail inaccuracies were misrepresentations in terms of: "emphasis or accent. If there was an article that was twelve inches long, [the reporter] would spend nine inches on something that occupied three minutes in the meeting. I don't think that's fair." Often an undue emphasis was placed on conflict and disagreement, as the president remarked:

> What they're trying to do is create the news in a sense. They're trying to set the agenda for the community. They focus on what is wrong, the conflict and controversy rather than more positive "what's right" or "here's just what's happening in an open-handed way."

Respondents felt that while vigorous debate over internally controversial issues had certainly emerged during the course of open meetings, the idea of disagreement and the function it plays on a university campus were not appreciated by news media representatives. Disagreement in the academy is not inherently negative or destructive, according to respondents. As one academic dean explained:

> RU would be far less interesting, and higher education would be far less interesting, if we did not live in a culture that reified disagreement. . . . [T]he kind of bantering and disagreement which happens in higher education is not the rule in other organizational settings. . . . [W]e applaud disagreeable people as being perhaps the focal point of new ideas. As contrasted with the Japanese notion that a nail sticking up wants to be knocked down. I don't think we've gotten a great shake here, but I think that this is not a phenomenon unique to RU and the News-Mail.

However, internal disagreements and disruption can be interpreted in non-academic settings as newsworthy signals that something is untoward, wrong, or afoot within the institution (D. Boeyink, personal communication, January 20, 1995). RU's president believed that evidence of internal disagreement or disunity made it difficult for RU to be perceived positively in the community:

> What you have is a lot of people, and they're not just faculty, this is a status that spins off into non-faculty people, too, who will talk to any reporter who comes by and just explain, you know, "Here's what's wrong with this place, here are all the

> warts, all the problems." In terms of building trust with the people out there, those people don't understand that. And so, sometimes internal groups have a major impact, a negative impact, on building trust with the external community.

According to one academic dean, the general suspicion raised by public controversy at RU has been combined with a general media presumption of institutional mistrust:

> [Reporters are] searching to be the new Woodward and Bernstein. The post-Nixon press goes at all public institutions, all large institutions, whether they're higher education, whether they're corporate entities, whether they're the government--state, local, or federal--with a presumption that there's something wrong. And under those kinds of conditions, as perhaps the third or fourth largest employer in the city, regardless of what it is that we do for a living, we would be under scrutiny. (spoken emphasis in original)

According to the characterizations offered by this dean and other respondents, other institutions or organizations in the community would be regarded with similar levels of media skepticism. For example, another dean recalled a specific concern about a misquote in the local newspaper, but then added that his overall concern about balanced reporting is shared by others in the community:

> What came out was something that I had said but without the qualification that I had attached to it. . . . I just think it's inappropriate reporting. I think there's a point of view at the paper that is not favorable to the campus. Now, I hasten to say that the people in the public schools feel the same way. I spend a lot of time talking with them, and they're not thrilled with the News-Mail [coverage of the public schools] either.

The president also remarked:

> Speaking of distrust, people really distrust the media. They're very suspicious. And so that is a saving grace to us when people read things in the newspaper that are negative about the university in a kind of one-sided way. An awful lot of them now are just kind of automatically adding several grains of salt. . . . It may not do as much damage as your first impression might lead you to believe. But it's a problem. (spoken emphasis in original)

The unfavorable press coverage is regarded almost unanimously as a negative influence on public perceptions of RU's trustworthiness. However, the local newspaper also seems to serve an unintended, latent function as a common scapegoat for RU representatives and powerful others in the community. Other large and prominent business organizations in the community had also experienced media coverage characterized by

skepticism and distrust. Representatives of these organizations are among the ranks of the local "players" and "opinion leaders" with which RU seeks identification and alignment as it continues to position itself as an economic development force within the community and state. However inadvertently, the negative media reports on RU may have served to certify RU's arrival in the ranks of organizations large enough and powerful enough to merit media skepticism and presumptions of distrust. Levine (1997) makes a similar point as he compares higher education to other "mature industries" (p. A48) like health care which are subject to increased concerns about efficiency, effectiveness, and productivity. Media coverage, in effect, represents one way to educate stockholders, stakeholders, and potential consumers by reporting on mature industries that may be otherwise impervious to public scrutiny.

However, according to respondents, the newspaper reports also sensationalized campus conflicts, and this sensationalism was attributed to the media industry's highly competitive market. Many respondents made this point, including two academic deans:

> [A]ctivities that occur within higher education become part of mediated discussion. That media may be anything ranging from CBS Evening News to Geraldo, from the New York Times to the National Inquirer. Whatever it is that happens in public higher education, it has an entree into the public sphere in ways that it had not previously been introduced. But the entree is not controlled by individuals involved in higher education directly but are controlled by those who are involved in the media industry, and their interest is in searching for a competition for--searching for a very competitive public market.

> The media business is a tough business right now. If you pay attention to what's going on in media right now--the schlock newspapers that they sell at the grocery stores. I can't think of the name of a one of them, but they are driving the business. It's sensationalism run amok. The clearest example is O.J. Simpson, but everybody feels they have to write something that is spectacular. And when you do that, you sometimes pick on people in ways that hurt.

This dean also explained:

> [In earlier years, and under local ownership, the News-Mail] had very good reporters, they paid very good wages for reporters, they gave them lots of license to pursue stories in depth. They encouraged them to become knowledgeable about the features they covered. And from an editorial perspective, the paper took on a role of kind of loving critic, supportive critic of the city and in general. [Then] the paper was sold to Gannett. . . . It [now] does not treat serious issues in depth, it has moved toward sensationalism. It is kind of like Richland Today; it is the same stuff

> as in USA Today. They tend to approach stories from the perspective of "Where's the confrontation?" and they see merit in reporting conflict. They have dealt with complex issues in relatively simplistic, conflict-driven ways.

RU respondents are not alone in their negative perception of news media. While media representatives tended to positively assess their performance as watchdogs, according to a 1995 poll, 66% of the public surveyed portrayed the media as being overly negative (Meisler, 1995) and too antagonistic and adversarial ("Public feels," 1995). Representatives from both the press and the public also believe journalists are cynical and do not effectively report complex situations ("Public feels," 1995).

Because of concern surrounding the newspaper coverage, one senior administrator routinely declines opportunities to comment on News-Mail stories, referring interview requests instead to campus media relations personnel. Part of the president's response to dissatisfaction with media coverage of RU has been to create alternate, more direct means of communication with community groups and persons he considers to be key:

> I've developed a strategy of going around the media, in a sense, because the media always wants to sensationalize controversy. If we get into something that may be a little bit controversial, I will prepare a kind of president's letter or insider's report to send out to key groups, including African American groups, to let them know what's going on, at least as we see it at the university or as I see it as president.

Respondents did not question the newspaper's right or duty to cover developments at RU, including the developments associated with the governance policy changes. The concerns centered on the perceived over-emphasis on conflict and dissent, and the perceived absence of perspective to appreciate the potentially constructive role that conflict plays in an academic setting.

## Status of Internal Trust

Respondents spoke of a recent internal erosion of trust, and most characterized it as an erosion of faculty trust in the president and board of trustees. They pointed to the toll on RU's internal functioning exacted by the governance policy controversy, and they

explained that the current erosion of internal trust has influenced their own perceptions of RU as a trustworthy institution. As shown in Figures 1 and 2, integrity and interpersonal regard were deemed critical to portraying an institution as trustworthy. For many respondents, however, both integrity and interpersonal regard within the institution remain primary concerns with implications for perceptions of institutional trustworthiness.

Governance Policy Changes. Internal processes surrounding changes in the governance policies figure prominently in respondents' assessments of the current status of internal trust. Due to the controversial nature of the proposals, the extreme polarity of opinions, the levels of energy sustained over the protracted series of hearings and negotiations, the limited amount of campus-wide compromise and consensus that was reached, and the eventual approval of the policies over strong faculty objection, many respondents characterized the current climate on campus as one of frustration and exhaustion. According to one faculty respondent: "By this point [when the governance changes were approved by the Board of Trustees], there wasn't any trust between the faculty and the President. Zero." Although respondents disagreed about whether the changes warranted the controversial attention or ought to have led to the kind of internal divisiveness that resulted, some perceived a link between internal decisions and processes and public regard for RU. For example, one academic dean warned: "Before you can have credibility with the public, you have to have credibility within the institution."

Perceptions of the trustworthiness and intentions of those in authority were important considerations in forming opinions about the scope and impact of the proposed changes. The importance of these perceptions is best illustrated by comparing the following interview passages about academic departments and the role of department chairs--the subject of one of the governance policy changes. The first passage is excerpted from an academic dean's recommendations for recapturing public trust; the second is from a faculty member's description of the changing roles of deans and department chairs:

> I think that one of the problems in universities is that they're departmentalized. And I have requested, and fought, and then urged that the notion of departmental chairs

> just be forgotten, because I think it unnecessarily creates barriers in the university between disciplines that ought to be working together. . . . If we can get over the knotty fear of "who's going to evaluate me" and all that kind of stuff, I think it would be a piece of cake.

> One of the big trends that I've seen since I've been here is that the deans generally have altered the pattern of their allegiance so that it is clear they work for the people upstairs. They are not partisan towards faculty. And that's one of the reasons that this governance business in the last two years was so threatening to members of the faculty. What happened as a result of that shifting in the decanal structure, the deans were no longer going to the president as advocates for their faculties but were really the president's agents working in the unit. That advocacy position defaulted to the department chairs: Part of their jobs and the implicit understanding of faculty members was that the department chair would go to bat for you if you were having trouble with the administration--they were the buffer people. But when this new governance stuff came up, people just said, "I don't have anybody to protect me, I don't have anyone to defend me. If the administration takes a notion that I need to be disciplined, <silence>."

To the dean, the department constituted a barrier to broader opportunities for interdisciplinary faculty collaboration that could improve student instruction. For the faculty respondent, the department chair is a rare ally for university faculty who are presumed to need allies in the current campus environment. In the faculty member's characterization, the department chair (i.e., as a "first-among-equals" faculty member) serves as a potential faculty advocate and a desirable buffer between individual faculty members and a comparatively more powerful senior administration. Another faculty member's comment echoes this perspective:

> [I]f you don't have any trust in the very top levels of administration, and administration tells you "Don't do this," you can say, "Well, he's going to have a hard time getting to me." But if he can get to you {laughs} by going directly to your chairman, now that threat is very real. And that was an issue that got to a lot of faculty.

During the course of the governance change deliberations and adoptions, many faculty have become wary of senior-level institutional authority. A change such as the selection of department chairs is perceived among many faculty as a bid to gather academic departments into the administrative power structure by eroding the traditional deference to faculty self-governance within and of academic departments.[4] The president, in a follow-

up meeting, challenged this perspective, saying the intention of the policy is to empower faculty by locating authority in department chairs instead of allowing such authority to remain concentrated at higher organizational levels at RU. It appears, however, that the current status of perceived internal trust of the senior administration may be a critical factor that precludes the acceptance of the president's interpretation and stated motivations. In addition to the governance policies controversy, institutional decision making practices have changed, influencing many respondents' perceptions of internal trust.

Change in Institutional Decision Making Processes. Over the last 25-30 years RU has undergone great change in terms of physical size, student enrollment, organizational complexity, and institutional control. Some of the documents consulted, as well as some interview respondents, used the term "golden years" to characterize two separate but consecutive time periods in RU's history. For some, RU's golden years were the years just prior to entering the public university system when RU was a smaller, private, and more selective institution. It was also a poorer institution, but the sense of collegiality was strong. For others, however, RU's golden years were the years just after entering the state system, years that were characterized by exponential growth in student enrollment and faculty size. This growth was accompanied by infusions of needed revenue, construction of new facilities, and comparably few accountability expectations. RU's recent evolution as a university has included changes in organizational culture, and this cultural change has influenced respondent perceptions of the status of internal trust.

RU's relatively smaller size prior to joining the state system, its status as a private institution, and its relatively selective admissions were among the features suggesting that decision making at RU was then best characterized as collegial and relatively participatory (Birnbaum, 1990).[5] Due to RU's subsequent growth in size and organizational complexity, collegiality no longer characterizes decision making processes at RU. Decision making at RU is accomplished through internal political processes, according to respondents,

involving negotiations among competing interest groups and coalitions that are not necessarily apparent in the formal organization of the institution (Birnbaum, 1990).

Participants in political organizations are routinely involved in identifying threats, allies, and potential strategic advantages; building and maintaining coalitions; and achieving action through negotiating and bargaining--often conducted outside of formal or public avenues (Birnbaum, 1990). For example, one senior administrator regarded the hours spent in meetings as essential since meetings allowed people to air issues and first reactions privately:

> If I did an accounting of the hours I spent in meetings in a given year, it would be astronomical. Books are written about crisis management. Well, usually that means something's happened and we're managing the crisis. I'm talking about anticipating the crisis before if happens, doing enough meetings before the meetings so that when we finally meet, people have washed some of their concerns through and we have a much more fair and ethical discussion where you don't have to light incendiaries. You know, when people get blown up.

Senior administrators and most deans at RU are relatively comfortable and skilled at participating in these political processes; faculty less so. For example, senior administrators and deans often referred to other university persons, units, or internal groups as "publics" of note to themselves or to their units. However, faculty respondents spoke of internal strife (in some cases quite prolonged) and occasions for voicing disagreements, but they identified instances of perceived political maneuverings by the president or board members as deviations from or disruptions to appropriate and expected institutional decision making processes.

For example, one faculty member expressed frustration with early discussions of the post-tenure review policy and faculty efforts to remove original language in the proposal. Efforts were made through the faculty senate to delete language that proposed an unsuccessful review as grounds for possible termination of tenured professors:

> If you look at it, [periodic career review] is a faculty <u>development</u> tool. While we're being told we're commodities and we're resources and we need to be accountable, all of our efforts to provide a collegial framework to this thing have been ignored. (spoken emphasis in original)

Interpreting political decision making processes to be collegial processes can result in miscommunications as well as missed opportunities to effectively advance sets of interests. For example, the following interview passage shows a faculty member's acknowledgment of the president's skillful use of invited feedback:

> We're going back to '90, '92, in that era: There was this R&R--restructuring and reallocation? I can't remember the acronym now. But anyway, essentially it was a wholesale look at the university and ways to reposition it. And what the president did at that time--in retrospect it was a brilliant move--he said, "I want all the faculty input I can have. I want the faculty to have a major role in helping us decide what we need to do here in terms of moving this university forward." So he formed all these different task groups and allowed them to essentially collect information from all sources and then bring it together to a big task group that the Provost chaired, who had all this information. Well if you ask--I don't care what group it is--if you ask a very diverse group of people for their ideas, you're going to get good ideas and bad ideas. So he had all kinds of things on the table and he could pick and choose. And he did. I mean, it opened the door for him to be able to say, "Well, here's one I like. Let's use this one. Here's one the faculty won't like, but I do. Let's use this one. It's their idea." I mean, it was just beautiful, you know? "Everything came from the faculty and the staff. We didn't generate any of this stuff." That created a great deal of anger and rancor within the faculty senate.

This faculty member acknowledged the president's deftness in culling through a variety of ideas for organizational restructuring and identifying selected ideas for advancement. This faculty member is also retrospectively reinterpreting a seeming collegial outreach as a political technique used, he now suspected, to support the president's and trustee's prior decisions regarding organizational change. In accordance with Cohen and March's (1974) description of administrative decision-making, the president had in effect provided a garbage can[6] for campus-wide feedback and ideas that were then available for his selective retrieval or dismissal.

With respect to the increasingly strategic and political decision making climate that senior administrators had introduced to RU, one dean remarked:

> I think the faculty [in this unit] were a little slow to understand that strategic thinking and developing strategic priorities were important factors in budgeting and not simply the idle playthings of administrators. And it was when [this unit] began to express its priorities in a strategically coherent way and explicitly to align its stated priorities with the stated priorities of the administration that resources--although by that time restricted--nevertheless began to flow [this way] in greater percentage shares.

One aspect of the political nature of decision making that appeared to be of particular concern for faculty was that information-sharing and decision making often occurred out of the public eye--as in the case of the senior administrator's earlier description of meetings preceded by rounds of preliminary or preparatory meetings. One faculty respondent who had earlier served on the board of trustees by virtue of his faculty senate office remarked about the board:

> My experience on the [RU] board may make me think this is the way that corporate boards operate. It seems to be more important to them that they act corporately and in apparent unity, that is, unity as far as the outside world is concerned, than that they get into big scraps privately with each other. So the facade of unity between the board and president is much more important to them than critical questioning and evaluation in public. And that to me seems to be the mark of an autocratic way of doing things, than one that is collegial and democratic. Because certainly the members of the college have no difficulty in making public criticism of the dean. Academics are trained to be critical, that's what their job is. And that's not the style of these people. . . . [E]ven monolithic unity is more important than values of discourse and deliberation. So that we're being ruled by a group of people whose essential values are radically different than those of the corporate members of the institution. Bound to cause problems. (verbal emphasis in original)

This observation not only distinguishes practices of relatively public collegial discussion from private deliberation, it also associates the former style with academic settings and the latter with business organizations. In drawing these distinctions, the respondent has identified these business sector practices and values as interlopers on academic territory.

One state politician's public characterizations of university faculty as "lazy people who didn't do anything and who published nonsense articles in itty-bitty journals" was widely cited by respondents and raised an additional concern for one faculty respondent about RU's leadership. He expressed frustration that senior administrators and trustees said nothing publicly in response to the allegations of faculty indolence and irrelevance. In fact, according to this faculty member:

> Faculty all screamed, but there was no board [of trustees], and RU's board in particular, who spoke up and said, "That's reprehensible! How could you say something like that?" . . . . I should think that anybody who serves on the board of an institution should be able to defend that institution. They should know about the various and sundry programs that go on at RU that benefit the state. Shoot, they ought to carry a card with them that lists it and say, "If I'm ever asked this question, recite this."

For this faculty member, the board's lack of public response signaled an inability or unwillingness among board members and senior administrators to enter into public discourse in defense of RU's faculty. This faculty member identified the inaction as a failure of administrators and trustees to act collegially. The president instead defined the same episode as simply a provocative political volley and went on to explain how RU had quietly used this situation for subsequent advantage at the state level.

If the comment were framed as a political charge, according to the president, public administrative and board responses were neither necessary nor desirable. The comment itself was preposterous, and the fact that it was intended to provoke outrage and anger made it worthy of non-response. Additionally, at the time the remark was made, the legislature was out of session, and the president insisted that taking on this politician publicly would not have been wise. According to the president, his and board members' participation in private and systematic negotiations with legislators while the media furor died down helped result in a large increase in state higher education appropriations during the next legislative session. In the president's estimation, channeling anger into efforts to achieve the appropriations increase was a more meaningful and satisfying outcome, and he maintained that this outcome could have been precluded had he engaged the politician publicly.

According to one academic dean, apprehending and understanding cues that are often tacit is critical to succeeding within an organization:

> I'm one of those who believes that all organizations have certain sets of conventions, that the success or failure of an individual is related to either their ability to understand the conventions and perform consistently with them, or to perform with levels of excellence such that failure to conform to conventions is not relevant to the ultimate success or failure of that individual. Beyond that, it is a matter of getting a handle on understanding the conventions, understanding the peculiarities of this organizational culture, to not get inappropriate cultural cues about what will be rewarded and what will not within this organizational setting. Most individuals have to find out for themselves what they think they need to know that will help them adapt to the organization, and I guess I'm wont to presume that I could know for a colleague what they would need to know to succeed.

RU appears to function predominantly through political decision making, and its senior administrators operate using strategies largely characteristic of political decision making. RU faculty have recently begun adopting political strategies and approaches such as coalition-building in advancing faculty concerns and exercising faculty influence. For example, membership in the local AAUP has risen in recent years, and the chapter has recently countered administrative assertions of financial austerity by hiring a consultant to conduct an audit of endowment funds and use. Additionally, the faculty senate recently argued that the absence of a shared vision statement for RU constituted grounds for delaying implementation of the approved governance policies. A delay would have allowed time to produce such a statement, and it also would have allowed time for faculty to formulate strategies for further delays or repeal of the policies.

Institutional Accessibility

An undercurrent of accessibility appeared as a consistent theme for RU. For example, interpersonal access was implied in the close connections between institutional actors and members of institutional publics as well as in the characterization of trustworthiness as based in part on interpersonal regard. Additionally, respondents commented often and favorably on the relatively easy access to community resources, people and events, and on the quality of life they enjoy in Richland and at RU. One academic dean also described accessibility to community leaders: "I think that this is a remarkably open community. . . . If I feel I need to talk to the mayor, I'll call him up. If I want to talk with the head of this corporation or that, I'll call him up and I expect he'll call me back."

The annual, week-long slate of homecoming activities is held not only on campus but also at various sites throughout the city, suggesting ready access to the institution for the community at large. Institutional accessibility and its importance were also apparent in institutional participation in mutually-beneficial strategic relationships. In these cases, a

perception of institutional approachability is part of what makes these relationships possible. I have identified two forms of accessibility with respect to RU: practical accessibility, or avenues for direct participation, and virtual, or symbolic, institutional accessibility. Although as the discussion below demonstrates, these conceptions are not unrelated, they will be discussed in turn.

Practical Accessibility. Practical accessibility is demonstrated through opportunities for interaction between institutional representatives and members of the public. This practical accessibility is conveyed through: (1) giving contemporary relevance to institutional traditions of close community ties, and (2) energetic institutional participation in its own public arena.

First, RU representatives capitalized on institutional history and long-standing traditions, albeit often unacknowledged and underappreciated, of local service and close community ties by successfully meshing the institution's historical identity with its contemporary character of an up-and-coming, ambitious university. Richland University's close identification with its environment is partly a legacy of its institutional beginnings as a metropolitan-sponsored enterprise. RU continues to point to this close identification as a defining institutional characteristic. Although serving the needs of the Richland metropolitan area is now a formal part of its state-assigned mission, RU has been serving community needs since its early years as a confederation of professional schools.

As the current president began defining RU as a civic and economic resource, he claimed a new institutional identity for which potential justification already existed even though the notion of "university qua economic development resource" had not articulated. By the president's own estimation, he began drawing attention and assigning significance (i.e., economic promise) to RU's prior and continuing community contributions. Furthermore, as his interpretation of RU's public significance was understood and accepted by public leaders, he began expecting greater acknowledgment and support of RU and its work and service on behalf of the larger community. On the one hand, RU was familiar to

the community because of its long history of local contributions. On the other hand, RU suffered from a kind of benign and provincial familiarity not uncommon among metropolitan universities--its contributions were largely assumed and taken for granted. According to many RU respondents, popular conceptions and expectations of RU were often based on outdated personal experiences at RU or on ill-formed understandings of RU's full complement of programs and contemporary institutional accomplishments.

Along with this process of taking institutional credit for growth, programs, and accomplishments, new and heretofore unfamiliar aspects of RU were publicly highlighted--such as new programs, new buildings, modern equipment and curricular offerings. One effect of this selective emphasis was to distance RU from potentially outdated or static conceptions of it by emphasizing examples of institutional change and modernity. Through attempting to displace prior conceptions, RU spokespersons defined a new scope and broader boundaries. These new boundaries were also potentially higher boundaries between RU and its community, since familiar and popular conceptions of RU were being challenged. RU was asserted to be a place that would only be inadequately appreciated or understood through reliance on prior, and therefore limited, conceptions of the university.

Although outdated perceptions of RU were challenged in this process, RU was not then portrayed as an unrecognizable, inaccessible, or alien place. Pride in contemporary institutional accomplishments was accompanied by pride in RU's longevity, consistent performance, and continued service to the community. The paired sources of pride provided a claim to trustworthiness based on a record of institutional constancy and stability as a solid foundation for contemporary institutional ambitions: New accomplishments and endeavors simply complemented and extended the accessible, solid foundation that was already present.

Accompanying the repositioning of RU as modern and vital to the community was an increased emphasis on RU's accessibility in terms of formal access to people and information and in terms of shared goals and purposes. Through the identification of RU

as an economic resource and the identification of mutually-beneficial opportunities for cooperation, messages emphasizing RU's commitment to mutual concerns and goals for the community were sent. Ready institutional accessibility for cooperative ventures also suggested that impediments or barriers to such ventures were insignificant if not non-existent.

Additionally, RU representatives maintained sustained and vigorous levels of engagement in the community. As outlined in an earlier section of this paper, the notion of RU's public as an arena rejects a clear separation between external and internal (with respect to the institution) parties. Administrators and faculty often undertook responsibilities in community, government, and professional leadership, resulting in their occupying multiple public roles in multiple and relatively diverse settings. Established citizens in the community engaged with RU as students, lecturers, overseers, and guests. This kind of fluid participation between university and community members serves to increase the potential sources of voice for the university in its public arena. Additionally, institutional problems with building and maintaining internal trust more readily become concerns of more general audiences when distinctions between internal and external members are blurred.

This participation in multiple contexts is often referred to as "border-crossing" among various settings with their particular cultural values, norms, and goals. The term is especially applicable in multicultural literature but has also been used to describe teachers and other school representatives as they work in the school and live in the community (e.g., Wells, et al., 1995). According to many respondents, crossing over into involvements with various external groups appears to be an common expectation for university administrators, and results in frequent and regular cross-accessibilities.

One example is the deans' interactions with professional associations or guild representatives as members of the professions themselves as well as educators. The president and one senior administrator with a substantial public role spoke perhaps the most

clearly about self-conscious border-crossings within the community. The president spoke of his role in mediating and interpreting RU to various external groups and also interpreting external groups' expectations back to RU. One senior administrator discussed his work with some key community groups as predicated on identifying mutual values and goals as a basis for communication and general understanding. One faculty respondent also discussed how understanding values and aspirations from students' perspectives helps him communicate with students and appreciate their academic motivations. However, the examples of borders and cultural differences that faculty respondents articulated most often were internal ones--specifically, borders between a generally collegial culture among faculty and a generally political or corporate culture among administrators and trustees. These internal borders have become particularly well-defined over the last several years as institutional resources became scarce and disputes over resource allocations and governance policy changes became more pointed. However, faculty have more recently begun mastering these internal border-crossings and political negotiations.

Many RU administrators and faculty occupy multiple work and life roles which prompt them to flow in and out of the university. In some cases this occurs through formally-arranged leaves of absence or temporary assignments, but in most cases it happens through an ongoing balance of various university and community commitments. As a primary worksite, RU provides a home base for this kind of activity, and RU also benefits from the multiple roles of its representatives in other groups and in the public arena. As discussed earlier, institutional trustworthiness for many respondents was closely linked to patterns of actions by individual RU representatives. Although not all of the undertakings would classify as formally sanctioned RU outreach, the "reach" of RU into the community is nevertheless extended as representatives undertake these various roles. As a result, RU integration into the community is achieved partly through the respective efforts and undertakings of its individual members.

In summary, for many respondents from administrative ranks, the border-crossings and memberships in various external groups were not regarded as extraordinary involvements or expectations. Through personal involvements in the community, they were able to increase practical accessibility and monitor feedback and potentially important occurrences. These involvements also increased the potential for multiple sources of influence in the public arena. Boundaries between RU and the community are relatively low, and external/internal borders are regularly crossed. In a sense, a simultaneous internal and external residency occurs for some RU representatives, providing diffused identities for these representatives within the community. Since many RU representatives are well-known and well-integrated into the community and also undertake other commitments, a degree of trustworthiness of RU is similarly identified with trustworthiness of its representatives within the community. Accessibility to RU and to its representatives within the community also underlines the fine-grained and subtle integration of RU into the community, resulting in RU's inextricable presence in the fabric of civic life and in its own public arena.

Virtual Accessibility. Maintaining an aura of virtual accessibility is also a critical underlying feature in interplays of institutional trustworthiness. Virtual accessibility is not necessarily based on direct participation but on comprehension of the institution and its intended social roles. Examples of this kind of accessibility include public understandings of: institutional embodiment of shared values, institutional pursuit of an appropriate balance of public goods, and fulfillment of the assigned institutional mission. In these cases, virtual accessibility is grounded in appeals to a broad understanding of what this particular social institution should be doing. In other words, highlighting selected institutional actions as evidence of institutional commitment to shared values, desirable social goods, or mission fulfillment serves to make a university metaphorically accessible by laying an orderly context and comprehensibility onto institutional acts and goals.

Virtual accessibility of RU was communicated through anecdotes or episodes, and it was particularly important to demonstrating trustworthiness for citizens who have little direct knowledge of what goes on at a college or university. According to Goffman (1974), anecdotes and stories are powerful because they tacitly introduce or reinforce shared understandings, or in his terms, social frames: "Our understanding of the world precedes these stories, determining which ones reporters will select and how the ones that are selected will be told. . . . We press these stories to the wind; they keep the world from unsettling us" (1974, pp. 14-15). It is not startling to assert that institutions act self-consciously in deciding which acts or goals to pursue. However, following Goffman, social need or institutional interests are not the only guiding forces in making these decisions:

> [W]e sometimes act now with the sole intent to provide the hard evidence that can be called on later as documentary proof of our having (or not having) acted in the manner that comes to be questioned. We have charity balls so that the next day news coverage will appear, the coverage and not the ball serving to advertise the charity (1974, p. 79).

Following Goffman, RU's medical and dental rural outreach programs are maintained not only because the practical need for them but also because they serve as direct and comprehensible evidence of attention to mission. The program of endowed scholarships for local African American students serves to assist worthy students and also to remind the community of RU's commitments to rewarding excellence and encouraging educational attainment.

Virtual accessibility so construed is a vicarious tacit understanding of an institution's underlying purposes and does not require direct engagement with the institution in order to develop the intended understandings. Shared understandings of institutional purpose and intentions, then, is not necessarily dependent on direct or personal accessibility to or experience of the institution. However, in this case, direct or practical accessibility was an equally important theme in institutional trustworthiness.

## Analysis and Conclusions

As the above influential factors suggest, demonstrating institutional trustworthiness can be usefully thought of as successfully bridging history, priorities, and cultures in ways that call attention to the institution's continued relevance and vitality as an expert that is capable of helping the community realize desirable benefits. As respondents seek to demonstrate this trustworthiness, however, they are mindful of conditions or circumstances--often beyond their direct control--that can facilitate or hinder perceptions of trustworthiness. For example, conflict in the sense of principled public disagreement is a typical faculty activity (as well as popular entertainment) within an academic community. However, news reports of conflict and disunity can raise questions about the stability or integrity of the organization that is experiencing the internal disharmony. Sensationalized news reports with a prevailing emphasis on conflict and presumptions of skepticism or distrust combine to jeopardize public perceptions of institutional trustworthiness. However, it also appears that potentially negative influences of media coverage might be blunted among some members of the community, since widely-shared skepticism of the media may inadvertently serve to legitimate RU's status as an influential community institution.

A generally positive influence on public confidence in RU is respondents' involvement in the community. Respondents use the occasions of their work-related as well as private involvements to collect and monitor anecdotal feedback on institutional performance. This activity helps respondents become aware of shifts in opinion or circumstance of which RU should be aware. Additionally, judgments made about RU representatives as citizens influence judgments made about the integrity of the institution the individuals represent.

The status of internal trust in institutional leaders influences insiders' perceptions of institutional trustworthiness. Sustained disagreement between faculty and senior

administrators and the lack of negotiated consensus on governance policies contributed to faculty perceptions of an administrative disregard for faculty. Additionally, the use of different institutional decision making processes seemed to further divide faculty from senior administrators. Faculty objected to administrators' use of business sector styles of leadership and political approaches to decision making at RU. Administrators' political gestures were misinterpreted as opportunities for collegial participation with faculty, and faculty attempts to overlay collegial processes onto the governance policy negotiations became irrelevant as the board of trustees endorsed administrators' views and goals--an endorsement many faculty believed to be a foregone conclusion.

Faculty concerns centered on the questionable integrity of the decision making process and the perceived lack of respect for faculty and their input. Additionally, the administration's perceived lack of faithfulness to academic traditions of collegiality and faculty self-governance led many to question institutional integrity and trustworthiness. Administrators were equally vexed by faculty reactions and conduct during the deliberations. According to many administrative respondents, faculty stubbornly refused to concede that the degree of organizational flexibility that the changes afforded was a necessity in a rapidly changing external environment that demanded more and more accountability and responsiveness. In a sense, faculty were perceived to be thumbing their collective noses not only at RU administration but also at the public for resisting critical institutional demonstrations of accountability and responsiveness through external outreach and also through implementation of internal measures of accountability.

Regardless of their perspectives on the internal governance changes, virtually all respondents expressed concern about the media spotlight directed at RU during the course of the debates. Respondents feared that the differences of opinion, as they were publicly aired by the media, portrayed RU as a campus consumed by its internal problems at the expense of its public responsibilities. Institutional leaders further feared that RU would be

perceived as an institution out of control. Counteracting this perception, however, was a general skepticism of media coverage that was shared broadly by community leaders.

The notion of accessibility was also a contextual theme in maintaining institutional trustworthiness. Virtual accessibility, or raising the level of institutional comprehensibility among members of the public, reminds people what the institution represents in the state and what the institution intends to accomplish or contribute. At this case site, practical accessibility, or participation opportunities, is also critical to conveying institutional trustworthiness in light of this institution's history and contemporary role as a metropolitan university. For RU, providing such participation opportunities was a logical extension of its institutional traditions of community service and connectedness, and these practices also supported RU's efforts to exercise influence directly or indirectly in the public arena.

Through offering practical accessibility to the institution and participating actively in civic life and the public arena, the institution participates with and within its environment to prioritize and pursue public goods, some of which pursuits are then adopted by the institution. Additionally, by inviting direct participation, a university is not easily compartmentalized or bounded as apart from its community. Instead, following Hackman's (1985) research into centrality and peripherality, the university is identified with central community interests and participates in the public arena to evaluate and advance these interests. Public confidence in the university is folded into confidence in the public arena and the promise of its political processes.

This public arena also provides the space for demonstrations as well as judgments of institutional trustworthiness. Acts of institutional responsiveness are made, and alignments and mutually-beneficial exchanges are negotiated. Additionally, media, institutional, and participant interpretations of institutional actions are made, and judgments of institutional trustworthiness are formed. Public accessibility to the institution as well as institutional accessibility to dynamic public processes remain important conditions underlying trust and trustworthiness.

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[1] Such incentives include student outcomes assessment and faculty productivity expectations. See, for example, Ewell and Boyer (1988) and Mercer (1994) for discussion of increased legislative oversight of public higher education.

[2] Richland University and RU are pseudonyms.

[3] For a more detailed explication of this process, see Hamrick (1996a) and (1996b).

[4] More precisely, this is of concern among faculty for whom this departmental selection process would be a change. In many professional schools, a similar selection process for department or unit chairs is long-standing.

[5] However, characteristics that would not necessarily be indicative of small college collegiality include the long-standing strength and size of graduate and professional education at RU. According to one academic dean: "Some other schools have kind of gone from the undergraduate base upwards, but we've gone from the graduate base inward."

[6] "Garbage can" is a provocative and counterintuitive descriptor (i.e., not dismissive or pejorative) of administrative decision making processes. A garbage can is a holding place of sorts for various and often unrelated questions, answers, decisions, and rationales that can be retrieved and selectively matched as administrators identify decision opportunities.

Fig. 1: Demonstrating Institutional Trustworthiness

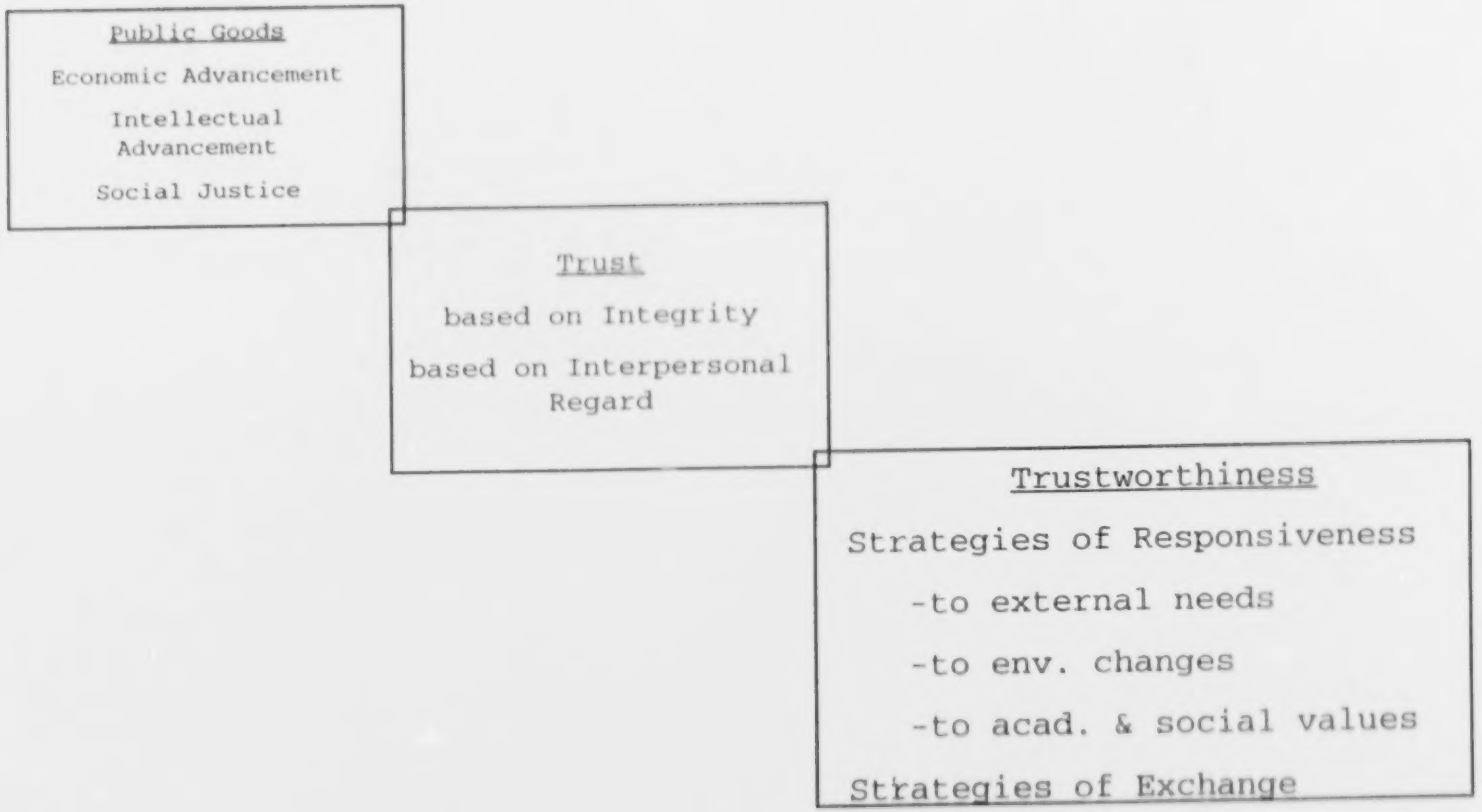

Fig. 2: Conditions that Influence Institutional Trustworthiness